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ABSTRACT

The primary task of all teachers at all grade levels in all disciplines should be to identify the poor reader and find assistance for that student. "Sink or swim" thinking, which permits nonreaders to advance through the school grade hierarchy and into society, must be phased out of the educational consciousness of the nation. Recent research has shown that phonics instruction is important in the early stages of reading, but some students simply do not learn the decoding skills needed to advance their reading skills. These students make very little progress even after they are grouped together and given special reading material, usually in the middle school years. Explicit phonics instruction appears not to work beyond the second grade, so other remediation techniques, such as computer-assisted instruction, peer tutors, and the "vowel-sound-stick" method, should be implemented. However, it is not a question of method. Given early identification, most young readers with decoding problems can be taught the essentials of decoding through one method or another. (RS)

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DECODING SKILLS AND THE REMEDIAL READING PROGRAM

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DECODING SKILLS AND THE REMEDIAL READING PROGRAM

Recent alarm over the apparently poor reading skills of American children has led modern educators to begin an in-depth study of the teaching of reading in public schools. The focus of this study has primarily been upon the initial stages of the learning process, when in the traditional view, most students "either get it, or they don't." This harsh sink or swim attitude prevailed for years in America, apparently because most students were swimmers, and there was an available social framework for sinkers in terms of employment after schooling. The modern technological society, however, has changed our attitude, and reading has been upgraded from "an important skill" to one of survival. Even though much of the evidence quoted to demonstrate a decline in overall literacy rates comes from comparisons of current test scores with those of the past, test scores are not what provide the pressure for change in the teaching of reading today. It is the need of the society for close to one hundred per cent literacy that ultimately is putting the pressure on the schools. According to The Report of the Commission on Reading, "What was a satisfactory level of literacy in 1950 probably will be marginal in the year

2000." (Anderson et. al. , p. 3) This applies to both individual and group literacy. Because of this requirement, more and more concern is being shown for the remedial student, the "sinker" of years past.

Recent advances in the psychology of human perception and understanding have given us new techniques for studying the manner in which the human mind converts the symbology of the alphabetic word into patterns which it recognizes as familiar from its aural vocabulary. Through these studies we have come to accept the fact that phonic decoding is a necessary first step in teaching youngsters to read. Abandoned by the schools for a time, phonics based reading instruction is now normally taught in the primary grades. Most evidence supports the fact that pairing spoken and written words is an essential first task in learning to read. (Maclean, p. 516.) Beginning with carefully selected regular vowels, vowel combinations, and the simplest consonant forms, students are shown the familiar patterns that make up simple words. By comparing the common appearance of words such as hat, cat, rat, and mat, with their "heard" version of the words, the students make the connection that allows them to read these words, words which are already defined in their vocabulary by experience. After

once making these connections, the students progress to the less obvious and more complicated letter combinations of the language, still working, however, with regular and familiar forms. Later, the less regular forms are introduced -- word pairs such as "have" and "save" for example -- and the student is asked to understand that much of his reading vocabulary will need to be visually memorized, not sounded out. Gradually, through practice, the student comes to realize that all reading is a visual process, and his dependence on phonic cues drops away. Evidence exists to support the fact that for "most good readers as young as fourth grade, word recognition is essentially a visual process." (Maclean, p. 515.) For these readers, phonics is only necessary when attempting to "sound out" unfamiliar words. Most experts recommend that the teaching of explicit phonics be completed by the end of second grade.

This is the way it is supposed to work. For many readers, it simply does not happen in this fashion. For some readers a block forms somewhere during the learning of the intial decoding process, and as a result they do not gain the essential decoding fluency essential to good reading. Why these blocks occur is a subject of much investigation and debate. What is not debated is that many

of the students who need remediation fall into this category, and that without remediation their decoding errors will persist into secondary school, causing a loss in reading comprehension which will affect their entire school performance. (Jones et.al., p. 123.) The studies of the initial failure of young readers to understand decoding show a myriad of possible causes, from inefficient teaching techniques in public schools, to inappropriate basal readers, to the wide range of learning disablities which exist in our population. (Anderson et. al., p. 57.) Some students may not make the original connections between the visualized word and their own auditory vocabulary; others may not be able to advance when more complicated combinations are introduced. For others, the introduction of irregular forms may be incomprehensible after being taught explicit phonics, and attempts to remember words that they cannot sound out may be "too hard." (It would be interesting to compare decoding difficulties for native readers of more regular languages such as German, with those of the reader of the American language.) For whatever reason, or combination of reasons that a reader does not learn the early phonics decoding skills, it is clear that he

has missed an opportunity to succeed which will never be available to him again.

This lost opportunity is not necessarily the fault of the schools. There seems to be some sort of short term mental window of understanding which remains open for a relatively brief time span, during which phonics decoding is easily acquired. After it closes, some students have difficulty learning to read through a phonic approach. Still, most studies show that decoding skill is the most common predictor of reading fluency and that without fluency, comprehension is extremely difficult. In an article in Academic Therapy Magazine, J.L.Eldridge states that "If a sentence is not read in a certain period of time, comprehension tends to deteriorate, because its structure collapses and what remains is a string of words producing little meaning." (Eldridge, p. 376.) We all are familiar with this type of reader -- the one whom the teacher always called down for "lack of expression" when reading aloud. This, in fact, is an indicator of decoding ability, not acting skill. "Students who are not automatic usually read without expression. In fact, expression-- or prosody --is an indicator of automaticity and is not a separate reading skill. When teachers ask students to read with expression,

the implication is that the students are able to read with expression but are willfully withholding it." (Sanvis p. 19.) The pain caused to students who do not find this expressive ability in their oral performances in front of their peers is intense: such stigmatizing was one of the greatest evils of past reading instruction and undoubtably continues today.

If there are such obvious indicators of poor decoding skills available for the teacher, then the need for remediation should be apparent in the first few weeks of reading instruction. To most good teachers it probably is. But unless the school is blessed with a reading specialist who can work one on one with students who are not able to enter into the understanding which the "decoding window" allows, and help them learn the first phonic skills correctly, it is doubtful that any classroom teacher can remediate these problems in a class of thirty beginning readers. Therefore, most students who do not begin reading with good decoding skills continue to struggle along without them, and very little progress in skill is the result. Without the ability to sound out words of more than two syllables, for example, new vocabulary cannot be learned. For most students, this does not hamper their progress

through the grades until middle school, where suddenly class and homework assignments begin to demand a new level of reading and writing skill. It is in these middle school years that the needs of the remedial student become so acute that schools begin to take steps.

Unfortunately, the common approach the schools take does not address the usual need. This approach is one of selecting out students with lower reading skills and grouping them together, providing them with special materials which they will be able to understand. What this normally entails is the provision of elementary books for junior high students and junior high materials for high school students. Even this limited remediation would probably be effective if the targeted students did enough reading. According to J.L. Milligan, "There are no special skills that readers must learn that are not or cannot be learned by reading." (Milligan, p. 33.) Unfortunately, students in lower level classses do very little reading. Much time is spent on vocabulary drills, spelling lists, grammar workbooks, and "enrichment activities" such as films, which, while valuable activities for good readers, do little to aid the non-reader in gaining of basic skill. Milligan comments, "Too much time is spent...[on activities]

not necessarily helpful to older readers." (Milligan, P. 33.) What reading is assigned is seldom structured incrementally with an eye towards helping students progress. Instead, books are assigned to be read in the same fashion as in more advanced classes. The materials are kept simpler, true, but simpler materials are frequently inappropriate for the age group to which they are assigned. Keeping it "baby simple" for adolescents is terribly destructive to their reading self-esteem. Remedial students will make no attempt to read books which they perceive as "not worth the efffort." In this they are no different from good readers.

Then what needs to be done? If, as many experts maintain, phonics is a necessary introductory skill then it needs to be taught effectively in the primary grades. And if, as some experts maintain, "it is a useful skill for which they will have little need as competent readers," (MacLean, P.515.), and if it is true that, "if students have not gotten material phonics by junior high years than usually another method must be employed" (Sellers, P. 64.), than phonics remediation must be accomplished early in the student's reading career. What methods are available to the already overburdened elementary teacher?

One method, which seems to show great promise, is computer assisted instruction in reading. As yet there has been little time to assess the ability of the computer to aid in reading remediation, but initial reports on the first reading instruction programs show that it is as at least as effective as traditional seatwork. A 1987 study of a program called "Hint and Hunt" showed good gains for readers with decoding problems. (Jones, et. al., P. 123.) Other programs exist which help students advance in reading skill, and are effective because of their novelty if nothing else. Not only do computers interest students -- they excite teachers as well, and this can be an important motivational stimulus for students who have little interest in what they find in the basal reader to pursue reading. In the first wave of computer programs, few were able to address aural phonic skills without a skilled partner to pronounce words for the benefit of the working student. New "true pitch " computer voice programs, however, should eliminate this need in the future. When a truly interactive "sight-sound" program becomes available, it should be possible to expand students' phonic decoding skills in a much more efficient manner than currently exists.

Until such a technological breakthrough is implemented in the nation's schools, however, other methods need to be employed. Many programs exist, too numerous to mention here. Some work on explicit phonics, others do not. Students may be encouraged to find phonic patterns embedded "inside" the word. (Shworm, p.16.) Or they may be given techniques for syllabication such as the "Vowel-Sound -Stick" method. (Sellers,.P. 66). One of the most effective of these methods makes use of "peer tutors" -- good readers from higher grades working with poor readers in lower grades. Such a method makes for effective interaction and a high level of motivational support for reading. In such a setting, poor readers make a very direct connection with the benefits to be reaped by good readers. One such system, "Project SCORE," developed by John Cradler demonstrated significant gains for poor readers in both standardized and citerion-referenced testing. (Cradler, P. 9)

It seems, however, that the question here is not one of method. Given early identification, most young readers with decoding problems can be taught the essentials of decoding through one or another method. What seems more essential, is that the nation's educators give up, once and for all, the idea that it is possible to be a limited reader and

survive in American society. "Sink or swim" thinking, which permits non-readers to advance through the school grade heirarchy and into the society, must be phased out of the educational consciousness of the nation. Students can no longer be allowed to be non-readers for social reasons. It must be the primary task of all teachers at all grade levels in all disciplines to identify the poor reader, and find for that student the assistance which he requires. Only then can we truly become "A Nation of Readers."

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